

## CP3 Conference 2007: Critical Workshops

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# TRANSFORMATION & APPROPRIATION

**Martin Phillips**

## ABSTRACT

*Using examples from music video, advertising and poem films, this session considered the ways in which digital technology encourages experimentation with textual forms and blurs the edges between genres. Taking the notion of mood or tone as a starting point, participants explored ways in which montage operates across a variety of texts. Some practical outcomes from the classroom were presented for analysis and discussion and the classroom contexts in which they were produced were examined.*

## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

In art, there are some who would argue that there is never an 'original' work, merely a creative set of re-workings. Thus Ferdinand de Saussure was quoted as a starting point for the exploration:

*'Much of the interest of works of art lies in the ways in which they explore and modify the codes which they seem to be using.'*

Shakespeare appropriated previous texts as sources for his plays; Baz Luhrmann appropriated Shakespeare and MTV to create Romeo + Juliet. Be-bop jazz musicians appropriated George Gershwin's 'I Got Rhythm' and then sampling DJs appropriate Parker.

Culturally we have become used to sampling and remixing as the norm. The history of film is partly about appropriation from other forms – technically from the magic lantern and the daguerreotype (the Realist tradition) but also narratively/fantastically from strip cartoons, pulp novels, Wild West shows and melodramatic theatre.

The starting point was a definition of terms:

- **Appropriation:** the act of taking for one's own use
- **Transformation:** a change or alteration – especially a radical one

These terms are best thought of as parts of the spectrum which Media Studies defines as **intertextuality**.

The July 2005 series of Stella Artois adverts for their sponsorship of the 'Classic Film' DVD series and two television adverts (for Typhoo Tea and Tango) were then deconstructed to reveal the various appropriations which informed them and added to their humour/interest.

Links were then drawn to the three strands of the conference and statements on creativity from the All Our Futures report:

- **Critical Practice:** where the transformation or appropriation is consciously part of the shaping process, some critical engagement with the initial source will have taken place. Is this 'a fashioning process – the active and deliberate focus of attention and skills in order to shape, refine and manage an idea' (All Our Futures)?
- **Creative Process:** for 'art' to have happened, something beyond straight plagiarism needs to have occurred. Is this 'using imagination – the process of imagining, supposing and generating ideas which are original, providing an alternative to the expected, the conventional, or the routine' (All Our Futures)?
- **Cultural Perspective:** the intertextual process either breaks down completely in the face of cultural boundaries (an advert which subverts the 'Daz doorstep challenge' only works for those aware of that cultural phenomenon) or enhances enjoyment (Bride & Prejudice).

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### PART 2: DECONSTRUCTING TEXTS

The starting point for an exploration of a filmed version of John Agard reading the Niyi Osundare poem 'Not My Business' was T.S. Eliot's notion of the objective correlative.

*'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.'*

Additionally, the BBC director Peter Symes, who with Tony Harrison almost single-handedly developed the genre of the film poem, considers that, 'Still words combined into lines are doing for the ears what single frames projected at speed are doing for the eyes.' With these notions in mind, participants looked at the film of the poem and applied the piece in relation to the questions that Rod Taylor has used for critical analysis of paintings:

- Can you imagine what the artist's feelings were while producing the work?
- Is the work quiet/noisy, soothing/disturbed, happy/sad, relaxing/jarring, angry/calm?
- Is your mood simply the one of the moment or has the work directly affected you? If the latter, what qualities in the work so affect you?

Roland Barthes contended that the 'grain of the voice' exceeds the verbal meaning of a text. This idea was explored in relation to this text after which, with examples of fifteen-year-old students exploring poetry through performing it to camera with an emphasis on grain of voice, framing and lighting were viewed and discussed.

A final appropriation was revealed when the image on which the shot set-up for 'Not My Business' had been based, (The Actors, a 1987 linocut by the South African artist Randy Hartzenburg) was shown, itself based on a culturally learned archetypal image for 'hostage/prisoner'.

Similar deconstructions were undertaken looking at the Franz Ferdinand pop video for Take Me Out and the video for the Doves song There Goes The Fear. Andrew Goodwin's work on reading pop video was applied to these works. He identifies three possible interpretive paradigms:

- **Illustration:** the most straightforward – a very literal set of images. Everything in the finished version derives directly from the song.
- **Amplification:** elements are added to the original. The mark of the auteur director will be evident, but the video enhances or develops ideas rather than fundamentally changes them.
- **Disjuncture:** here a whole new set of images are constructed, sometimes making little initial sense. Often arty bands are promoted this way to stress their originality.

### PART 3: CLASSROOM EXAMPLES

The workshop concluded by considering the notion of creativity in relation to students' practical production work.

The first example was from Newham Sixth Form College students who had taken the BBC appropriation of the Lou Reed song Perfect Day as a basis for their own reworking into a promotional video for their college. Finally, an animation by a Year 9 art class from Queen Elizabeth's College, Devon was viewed, exploring its debt to William Kentridge (whose work they had studied) but also its genuinely creative approach.

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